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"A Fine, Shaggy Excursion"
John Muir in the San Gabriels

by John W. Robinson

"John Muir, Earth-planet, Universe," he sometimes signed letters. Indeed, Muir was a man of the world, particularly in his later years when he roamed across five continents, ever seeking the nourishment of wild nature. From Alaskan glaciers to the steaming Amazon rain forest, from the Nile's mysterious headwaters to the foothills of the grand Himalaya, Muir reached out for the wilderness that redeemed his soul and strengthened his body. Yet, in all his wanderings, he remembered his 1877 excursion into Southern California's San Gabriel Mountains as a unique experience, the most "rigidly inaccessible" of any range he ever set foot to explore. He tells us so in *The Mountains of California*, his 1894 classic, written seventeen years later.

How did Muir come to visit the San Gabriels, a minor wrinkle in the Earth's mountainous geography?

Muir arrived in California in 1868, a footloose Scot of thirty. For nearly a decade he roamed the Sierra Nevada, seldom venturing away from this "most holy mansion of mountains." Then, in mid-summer 1877, he ventured south of the Tehachapis for the first time. Here is how it came to pass. Two of Muir's friends from University of Wisconsin days were settling, or about to settle, in Pasadena. One, Dr. O. H. Congar, with whom he had studied chemistry and mathematics fifteen years earlier, had moved there in 1874. The other, Mrs. Jeanne Carr, Muir's "spiritual mother" and dear friend since college days, had recently purchased a 42-acre piece of land in west Pasadena. The Carr family would move to their beloved "Carmelita," as they called it, in 1879.

Mrs. Carr wrote Muir an enthusiastic letter about the sunny lands and orange groves of the San Gabriel Valley. His interest was perked, and he wrote back: "Your description of the orange lands makes me more than ever eager to see them, in particular the phenomenon of a real lover of Nature such as you mention . . . And so you are going to dwell down there, and how rosily you write about it!"[1] A few months later, in July 1877, he jotted a note to Mrs. Carr announcing his intention to go south: "I only write now to say that next Saturday I will sail to Los Angeles and spend a few days in getting some general views of the adjacent region . . . I hope to see Congar, and also the spot you have elected for home."[2]

John Muir

After a voyage down the coast Muir stepped ashore at Santa Monica. He passed through Los Angeles, a town that did not impress him. Muir was no urbanist; the mountains were his forte. Then he hurried on to the Pasadena home of Dr. and Mrs. Congar.[3] He enjoyed a delightful week with his gracious hosts, reminiscing about Wisconsin days and touring the orange groves, vineyards and bee ranches of the San Gabriel Valley.

But Muir's main interest was directed toward the olive-green rampart of the San Gabriel Mountains, looming close on the northern skyline.

The San Gabriels in 1877 were little known to most valley residents. Bandits and horsethieves sometimes used its hidden dells and back country flats for escape and refuge. Prospectors searched the turbulant waters of San Gabriel Canyon and other south-facing streams for gold. A few miles east of Pasadena, Benjamin Wilson and his Indian help had blazed a steep trail to the top of Wilson's Peak, as it was then known, in 1864. But, according to Pasaden's early historian Hiram Reid, "no man had ever gone from Pasadena directly to the top of the mountains."[4] A good reason for this was the thick blanket of stiff, thorny shrubs and

dwarf trees, collectively called chaparral, that coated the slopes of the San Gabriels. This elfin forest formed an almost impenetrable collar between foothill and summit, and effectively discouraged entry.

This was no deterent to Muir. In fact, he relished such a wild challenge. Accordingly, in early August 1877, he took leave of his hosts and, in his own words, "made a fine shaggy little five days' excursion" into the San Gabriels.[5] He ventured alone, as was his custom in his early mountaineering years, toting only three loaves of Mrs. Congar's bread and a half pound of tea.[6] He carried no firearms, despite the threat of wild grizzlies; his reverence for life in all forms precluded killing even dangerous animals.

Muir's excursion into the chaparral-smothered mountains was indeed a challenge to him. Never before had he struggled through such a foreboding thicket of interlaced brush peculiar to the semi-arid, Mediterranean-type climate regions of the earth. A few weeks after his return he penned a vivid description of this dwarf forest: "In the mountains of San Gabriel, overlooking the lowland vines and fruit groves, Mother Nature is most ruggedly, thornily savage. Not even in the Sierra have I ever made the acquaintance of mountains more rigidly inaccessible. The slopes are exceptionally steep and insecure to the foot of the explorer, however great his strengh or skill may be, and thorny chaparral constitutes their chief defense . . . the entire surface is covered with it, from the highest peaks to the plain. It sweeps into every hollow and swells over every ridge, gracefully complying with the varied topography, in shaggy, ungovernable exuberance."[7]

But all was not toil and hardship. Muir rejoiced in the hidden beauty of the canyons he found deep within the chaparral hills: "But in the very heart of this thorny wilderness, down in the dells, you may find gardens filled with the fairest flowers, that any child would love, and unapproachable linns lined with lilies and ferns, where the ouzel builds its mossy hut and sings in chorus with the white falling water."[8]

Just where did Muir go on his shaggy little jaunt? We know for certain he visisted Eaton Falls, "a charming little thing, with a low, sweet voice, singing like a bird, as it pours from a notch in a short ledge, some thirty-five or forty feet into a round mirror-pool."[9] He called it the Yosemite of the San Gabriel.[10] We are reasonably sure he scrambled up the west ridge above the falls to the summit known today as Muir Peak. The remainder of his route has long been shrouded in uncertainty, and for two reasons.

One cause for confusion is Muir's custom of writing several differing versions of an episode. Bill Kimes, his bibliographer, puts it succinctly: "Muir's habit of using the same material, polishing, expanding, condensing, rearranging, and finally incorporating it into one or more of

his books has long been puzzling and frustrating to Muir scholars."[11] This is certainly the case with his San Gabriels scramble. He wrote about it four times, each differing in some details. He first gave a brief summary of the trip in a letter to Jeanne Carr, dated August 12, 1877, just a few days after his emergence from the mountains.[12] A few weeks later he composed a much longer and more detailed account for the *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin*, September 11, 1877. This remains the best account because it is the most complete and was written soon after the excursion; fortunately it was reprinted after Muir's death in the book *Steep Trails.*[13] Five years after his visit to the San Gabriels, he refined and condensed his *Bulletin* article and included it as the latter part of his essay "The Bee-Pastures of California," which appeared in *Century Magazine*, July 1882. Finally, he incorporated his Bee-Pastures essay, polished and slightly altered, as a chapter in his best known book, *The Mountains of California*, published in 1894.[14] to get the most complete picture of Muir's excursion, you must consult all of these sources, for each gives some fact or facet not covered in the others.

A second and even greater cause for confusion results from a major geographical error by Muir himself. He refers to the summit at the head of Eaton Canyon as Mount San Antonio several times, instead of, as it rightfully is, San Gabriel Peak. The mistake is never more obvious than in this passage describing the verdant dell around Eaton Falls as "a charming little poem of wildness, the last of a series extending down the flowery slopes of Mount San Antonio through the rugged, foam-beaten mosses of the main Eaton Canyon."[15] This may also explain why he gives San Antonio's elevation, which is actually 10,059 feet, as 6,000 feet. The latter elevation is very close to San Gabriel Peak's true 6,161-foot height. Several recent writers, unfamiliar with the geography of the San Gabriels, have taken Muir literally: They have him entering Eaton Canyon, then, in a gargantuan leap of some forty mountainous miles, they place him at the foot of Old Baldy![16] Even for one with Muir's stamina, this would have been a superhuman feat.

Using all the sources available, taking into account Muir's error in regard to Mount San Antonio, and being intimately familiar with the San Gabriels, it is not difficult to trace Muir's route. Let us follow him on his five-day ramble.

"On the first day of my excursion," writes Muir, "I went only as far as the mouth of Eaton Canon, because the heat was oppressive, and a pair of new shoes were chafing my feet to such an extent that walking began to be painful."[17] Here, while searching for a campsite along the boulder bed of Eaton Creek, Muir came upon "a strange, dark man of doubtful parentage." He spent the night at this hermit's cabin, listening to tales of

a woeful past and how the hermit hoped to dig an irrigation canal, make money and marry a Spanish woman.

Next morning, after a brisk half-hour walk by canyon, he reached the foot of Eaton Falls, its silvery spray dashing forty feet down into a crystal pool. Here he spent some time botanizing, filling his notebook with lyrical descriptions of furry mosses, ferns, maples and sycamores. He rhapsodized about the charm and beauty of the setting, "like a silver instrument in a velvet case. Here come the Gabriel lads and lassies . . . to make love and gather ferns and dabble away their holidays in the cool pool." The whole scene created "a charming little poem of wildness – the vestibule of these shaggy mountain temples."[18]

Above Eaton Falls, Muir's real climb began, and it was the most difficult part of his entire ramble. "I made my way out of the valley on the west side, followed the ridge that forms the western rim of the Eaton Basin to the summit of one of the principal peaks,"Muir explained. "I had to contend with the richest, most self-possessed and uncompromising chaparral I have ever enjoyed since first my mountaineering began. For a hundred feet or so the ascent was practicable only by means of bosses of the club moss that clings to the oak. Above this the ridge is weathered away to a slender knife-edge for a distance of two or three hundred yards, and thence to the summit it is a bristly mane of chaparral."[19] Muir's route here is crystal clear: directly up the ridge from Eaton Falls to the top of 4,688-foot Muir Peak, a steep 3,000-foot ascent through dense brush most of the way. The climb would be only slightly less difficult today. Most of the ridge is still chaparral-covered, except that a firebreak blazed in recent years has cleared the final 500 feet to the summit.

Muir reached the top shortly before sunset. After taking in a panoroma of mountain, valley and sky, tinged crimson and gold by the sinking sun, he hastened down into a tributary canyon in search of water. "Pushing through another mile of chaparral, I emerged into one of the most beautiful parklike groves of live oak I ever saw."[20] The canyon was dry where he first reached it, but a short distance below he came upon a pool in the hollow of a rock. After replenishing himself, he continued down canyon. "Tracing the dry channel about a mile farther down to its junction with a larger tributary canon, I at length discovered a lot of boulder pools, clear as crystal, bimming full, and linked together by glistening streamlets just strong enough to sing audibly. Flowers in full bloom adorned their margins, lilies ten feet high, larkspur, columbines, and luxuriant ferns, leaning and overarching in lavish abundance, while a noble old live oak spread its rugged arms over all. Here I camped, making my bed on smooth cobblestones."[21]

Where did Muir go from the summit, and where was his camp that

second night? Based on his foregoing description and his subsequent travel the next day, along with knowledge of the terrain, there can be but one logical answer. He descended the north slope of Muir Peak into the Idlehour Fork of Eaton Canyon, where he found that first pool of water. Then he dropped down Idlehour Fork to its junction with the main Eaton Canyon, just below today's Idlehour Trail Camp. This spot, deep in the heart of the canyon, retains today much of the pictureseque beauty Muir found there a century ago. He camped the second night either at the site of Idlehour Trail Camp or very close to it.

"Next morning, pushing up the channel of a tributary that takes its rise on Mount San Antonio, I passed many lovely gardens watered by oozing currentlets, every one of which had lilies in them in the full pomp of bloom, and a rich growth of ferns, chiefly woodwardias and aspidiums and maidenhairs," Muir writes.[22] His description is delightfully explicit but he makes two errors: he was in the main channel of Eaton Canyon rather than a tributary, and Mount San Antonio should read San Gabriel Peak.

While ascending the canyon he came upon a rattlesnake "with a bashful look in his eye." Muir, a rature-lover that he was, passed on, "lifting my foot a little higher than usual, and left him to enjoy life in this his own home."[23]

The canyon steepened near its head and the going became rougher. Muir was compelled to scramble over "a long system of cascades from ten to 200 feet high, one following the other in close succession down a rocky, inaccessible canon."[24] In another spot the chaparral closed in and he was obliged to creep more than a mile on hands and knees.

Muir's third camp was near the head of Eaton Canyon, close under the preciptous spurs of Mount Markham and San Gabriel Peak. "The rocks above me leaned over in a threatening way and were full of seams, making the camp a very unsafe one during an earthquake," he exclaimed.[25]

Day four was the climax of Muir's excursion, an ascent to the eastern rim of the basin in the vicinity of Mount Wilson. Again he found the going difficult. "The chaparral, in ascending the eastern rim of the basin, was, if possible, denser and more stubbornly bayoneted than ever. I followed bear trails, where in some places I found tufts of their hair that had been pulled out in squeezing a way through."[26] He rested in the shade of *Douglasii macrocarpa*, a conifer new to him, today popularely known as big-cone spruce.

"From the highest summit, far as the eye could reach, the landscape was one vast bee-pasture, a rolling wilderness of honey-bloom, scarcely broken by bits of forest or the rocky outcrops of hilltops and ridges," Muir exclaimed.[27]

What summit on the eastern rim did Muir reach? The most likely candidate in Occidental Peak, 5,732 feet high, located along the knife-edge ridge a mile and a quarter west of Mount Wilson. It seems almost certain he did not reach the latter, else he would surely have mentioned the log cabin there, the spring, and Wilson's train leading down the south slope of the mountain.

From his perch on the eastern rim Muir turned southward and began his descent, about which he tells us very little. "My last camp was down at the narrow, notched bottom of a dry channel, the only open way for the life in the neighborhood. I therefore lay between two fires, built to fence out snakes and wolves," he writes.[28] Since he gives us no details, we must use the map and speculate on his route the last two days. It appears likely that Muir dropped from Occidental Peak, or from some point eastward along the knife-edge ridge that joins the former with Mount Wilson, to Deer Park Branch of Eaton Canyon. Somewhere in the lower reaches of this narrow tributary he made his fourth night's camp. Next day, his last, he almost certainly dropped into the main Eaton Canyon and followed it out of the mountains.

His bread gave out a day before he reached Pasadena, so it was a very hungry John Muir who returned to the Congars. Mrs. Congar fed him an abundant meal and listened to his graphic account of his adventure. She was most happy about a little gift Muir presented her: "He brought me some tiger lilie bulbs from the mountains, and I planted them in my yard, where they have blossomed every year since; and I have always called them my 'John Muir lilies,'"[29]

A few days later Muir bade the Congars farewell and headed home. From Los Angeles, enroute, he penned an enthusiastic note to Mrs. Carr: "I made a fine, shaggy little five days' excursion back in the heart of the San Gabriel Mountains, . . . Although so gray and silent and uncompromising, they are full of wild gardens and ferneries. Lilyries! – some specimens ten feet high with twenty lilies, big enough for bonnets!"[30]

Muir returned to the San Gabriels twice in later years. Both were brief visits, accompanied by others, and neither was as noteworthy nor as "shaggy" as his solo excursion of 1877.

In 1896 he accompanied the National Forest Commission, authorized by President Grover Cleveland to inspect the nation's timber resources, on a western tour, during which Muir and the commission spent a few hours on Mount Wilson.[31]

In 1907 he joined conservationist friend Theodore Lukens on a visit to the Henninger Flat tree nursury above Altadena. Lukens had founded

the tree farm in 1903 and wanted Muir to see it. Muir was impressed: "I give my unqualified endorsement to the work done by T.P. Lukens. He is a plucky man. Last Sunday I visited the big nursery at Henninger's Flat and the work which Mr. Lukens started and fostered is carried on successfully. There are 10,000 trees up there, and every one should be planted and guarded. You can do nothing greater to add beauty and wealth of your enviroment than to reforest and protect your watershed."[32] The Forest Service ignored Muir's advice. Next year they abandoned the nursery.[33]

Muir Peak, rising 4,688 feet on the sinuous west rim of Eaton Basin, commemorates the great naturalist's 1877 visit to the San Gabriels. Although the name does not appear on contemporary maps, it has long been known locally as such.[34] In 1949 a redwood marker and metal register box were placed on the summit by Muir devotee Wandalee Thompson and the Angeles Chapter of the Sierra Club. The Club, founded by Muir in 1892, has sponsored a number of pilgrimages to the peak in recent years.

Standing atop Muir Peak today, you would need a fertile imagination to visualize what Muir saw a century ago. The summit is bare, bulldozed to carve a broad firebreak. A fire road hewes a horseshoe path around the upper slopes of the mountain. Looking north, across Eaton Basin to the Mount Wilson ridge, where Muir roamed in utter isolation, you see a forest of TV towers and telescope domes. Southward, when the sky is not muddied by pollution, the view is one vast urban sprawl. If Muir could return, what would he think now?

The redwood marker and register box have long disappeared. So have registers placed there since. Only a small weather-beaten cairn remains to mark the bare summit.

Time has been harsh on this earthen monument to John Muir. Time has not touched his books. They remain his lasting monuments.

NOTES

1. John Muir, **Letters to a Friend**, ed. by William Frederic Bade (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1915), pp. 182-183.
2. **The Life and Letters of John Muir**, ed. by William Frederic Bade (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1924), Vol. II, pp. 67-68.
3. Muir, in the letters mentioned above, spells the Doctor's ame "Congar," and his spelling has been used here. Pasadena historian Henry Markham Page spells it "Conger." See Page, **Pasadena: Its Early Years** (Los Angeles: Lorrin L. Morrison, 1964), p. 44 and many subsequent pages.
4. Hiram A. Reid, **History of Pasadena** (Pasadena: History Co., 1895), p.406. **The Life and Letters of John Muir**, op.cit., II, pp. 69-70.
5. **The Life and Letters of John Muir**, op.cit., II, pp. 69-70.
6. Reid, op.cit., p. 406.

7. John Muir, "In The San Gabriel. An Excursion of John Muir,"**San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin**, September 11, 1877. See also Muir's **Steep Trails** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1918), p. 145.

8. Ibid.

9. John Muir, **The Mountains of California** (New York: The Century Co., 1894), p. 376.

10. **Steep Trails**, op.cit., p. 149.

11. William F. Kimes and Maymie B. Kimes, **John Muir: A Reading Bibliography** (Palo Alto: William P. Wreden, 1977), p.xiii.

12. **The Life and Letters of John Muir**, op.cit., II, pp. 69-70.

13. **Steep Trails**, op.cit., pp. 145-153.

14. **The Mountains of California**, op.cit., pp. 372-380.

15. Ibid., pp. 376-377.

16. See, for instance, Nicholas C. Polos, "John Muir and The Lure of The San Gabriel Mountains," **Pomona Valley Historian**, VIII, 4 (October 1972, pp. 174-181. Mount San Antonio is more often called Mount Baldy today.

17. **Steep Trails**, op.cit., p. 147.

18. **Ibid.**, p. 149.

19. **Ibid.**, pp. 149-150.

20. **Ibid.**, p. 150.

21. **The Mountains of California**, op.cit., pp. 378, 380.

22. **Steep Trails**, p. 151.

23. **Ibid.**, p. 152.

24. **The Mountains of California**, p. 380.

25. **Steep Trails**, p. 152.

26. **Ibid.**, p.153.

27. **The Mountains of California**, p. 380.

28. **Steep Trails**, p. 153.

29. Reid, op.cit., p. 406. ,rs. Congar related this story to Reid in 1895.

30. **The Life and Letters of John Muir**, op.cit., II, pp. 69-70.

31. John Muir, "The National Parks and Forest Reservations," **Harper's Weekly**, XLI, 2111 (June 5, 1897), pp. 563-567. Muir does not state just where in the San Gabriels he and the commission went. However, a photograph on page 565 shows a group of well-dressed men (probably the commission members) gazing northward from Mount Wilson's summit. From this picture, I hazard an educated guess that they visited Mount Wilson.

32. Shirley Sargent, **Theodore Parker Lukens: Father of Forestry** (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1969), p. 68.

33. For the history of Henninger Flat, see this writer's **The San Gabriels: Southern California Mountain Country** (San Marino: Golden West Books, 1977), pp. 66-69.

34. Reid mentions it in 1895. See Reid, op.cit., p. 369.

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